

Statement of Congressman Scott Tipton
Wednesday July 31, 2013
Before the House Natural Resources Committee
Markup of H.R. 1526, Restoring Healthy Forests for Healthy Communities Act
Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute

Thank you Chairman Hastings for holding this important markup and for including my legislation--the Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act--in the overall package that we are considering today.

Revenues from responsible timber harvests on federal lands have long been an important source of funding for rural communities that have abundant forested, un-taxable federal land. Since 1908, Colorado and many Western states have used the revenues generated from timber contracts to fund education—as much as 25 percent of the revenue from these contracts went to the states and communities in which they originated.

For decades timber contracts provided a steady and reliable revenue source for Western states, but by 2000, timber harvesting on Forest Service lands had decreased by 50 percent in the 1990s compared to the previous decade, and by another 60 percent from 2000 to 2009.

In 2000, Congress passed Secure Rural Schools (SRS) as a temporary stop-gap to provide six years to restore timber harvesting and reestablish a reliable flow of royalties from timber contracts to be used for education in rural communities. Unlike the previous system where royalties were generated from timber harvesting profits, SRS is not self-sustaining, but funded out of the U.S. Treasury. Unfortunately, years of endless environmental litigation and a stagnant federal bureaucracy have resulted in further decline of the timber industry in Colorado and the West, rather than the recovery for which states were hoping.

As a result, SRS has been kept on life support past its intended expiration date with a series of extensions. The system is broken, and in its current state is unreliable and costly to taxpayers. Worse, it falls short of the benefits that could be provided to our classrooms, our communities and the ecosystem should we return to active forest management of overgrown federal lands.

As timber harvesting on public lands declined, the acreage burned by wildfire each year has increased just as steadily. Last year, one of the worst on record for wildfire, over 9.3 million acres burned, compared to only 200,000 acres of timber harvested, while there are 6.6 million acres of beetle killed timber in Colorado alone, primarily on federal lands.

Wildfire has changed the landscape of Western states, cost lives, and inflicted lasting damage to watersheds, habitats and property, not to mention strained budgets and left long-term economic consequences. From 2000-2012, 90,773,600 million acres burned in the U.S.—nearly as many as the previous three decades combined.

The cost of combating these fires is significantly greater than the cost of prevention through active forest management.

Over the last decade, the Forest Service budget has gone from using about 13 percent of its budget on fire suppression to nearly 40 percent, while advance treatments have decreased significantly due to excessive litigation and misprioritization by the federal government.

In a classic example of “Washington knows best”, rather than taking action to fix the problems that plague the system and precipitated the decline in responsible forest management resulting in increased wildfire and years of endless litigation from environmental interests, agency bureaucrats have done nothing but clamor for more money to continue on, business as usual.

I’ve seen this play out firsthand in my district. In May of 2010, the Intermountain Resources Sawmill, which is the largest mill in Colorado and one of the largest in the West, went into court ordered receivership primarily because federal obstruction prevented it from accessing a reliable supply of timber. The Mill is the primary processor for beetle-kill trees, has a \$5 million average annual company payroll, and supports 150- 250 jobs in Colorado. Not only have we seen a lost opportunity cost in terms of being able to address the hazardous conditions of our forests, but we’ve lost jobs and needed revenues for education. This is the same story that has played out time and again across the west.

The current approach just doesn’t make sense.

I’m pleased to have been able to work with my colleagues on this Committee, including Chairman Hastings and Rep. Paul Gosar, to craft a proactive forest management strategy that will take immediate action to address the emergency facing western forests.

My Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act (H.R. 818), which is in large part, included in the amendment in the nature of a substitute to Chairman Hastings’s forest package, would allow greater state and local involvement in wildfire prevention on federal lands in order to expedite hazardous fuels reduction projects and reduce litigation, and in doing so help restore sustainable timber harvesting, create jobs, and reinvigorate royalty payments for rural education. I urge your support of this commonsense package.